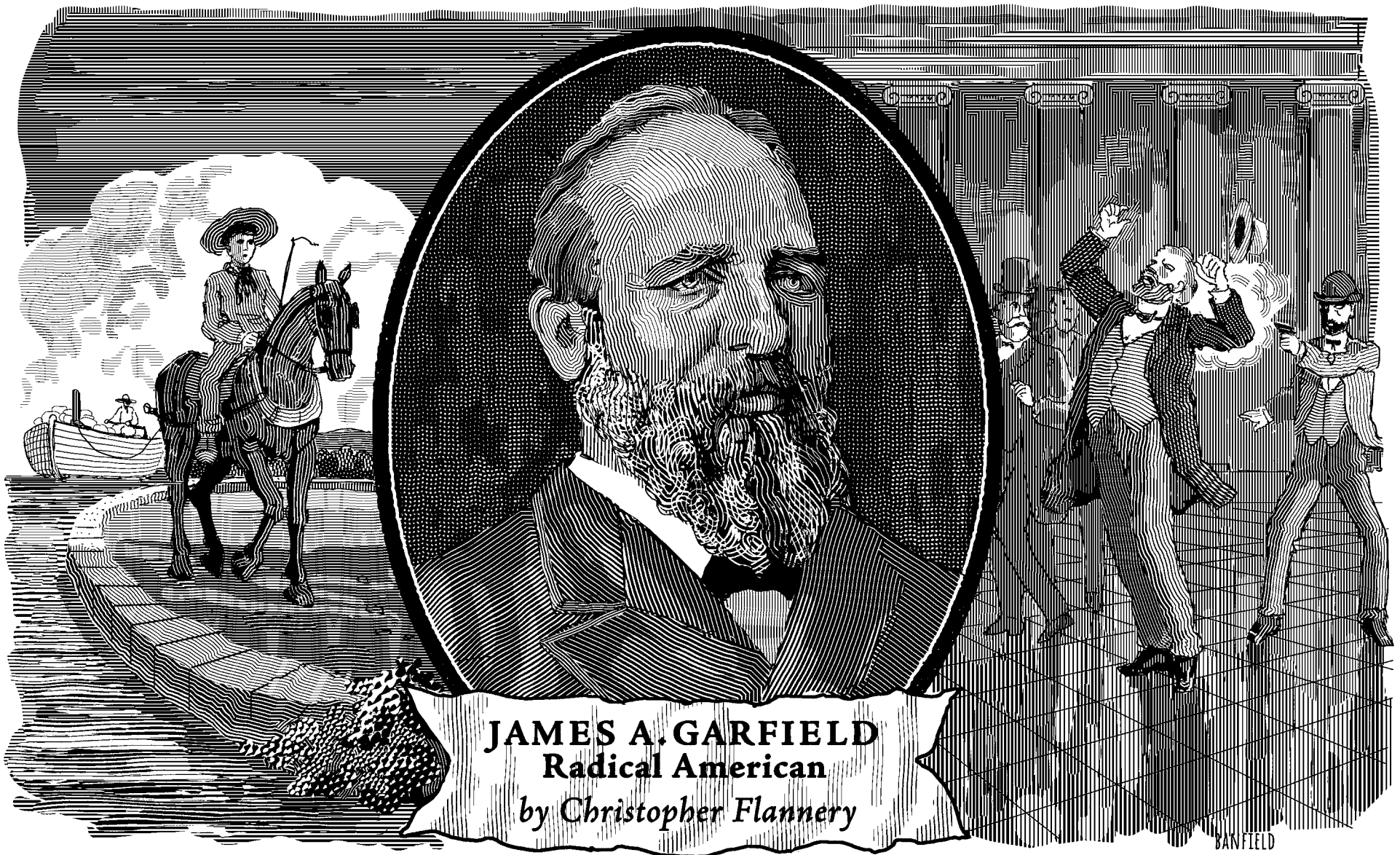


VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2023

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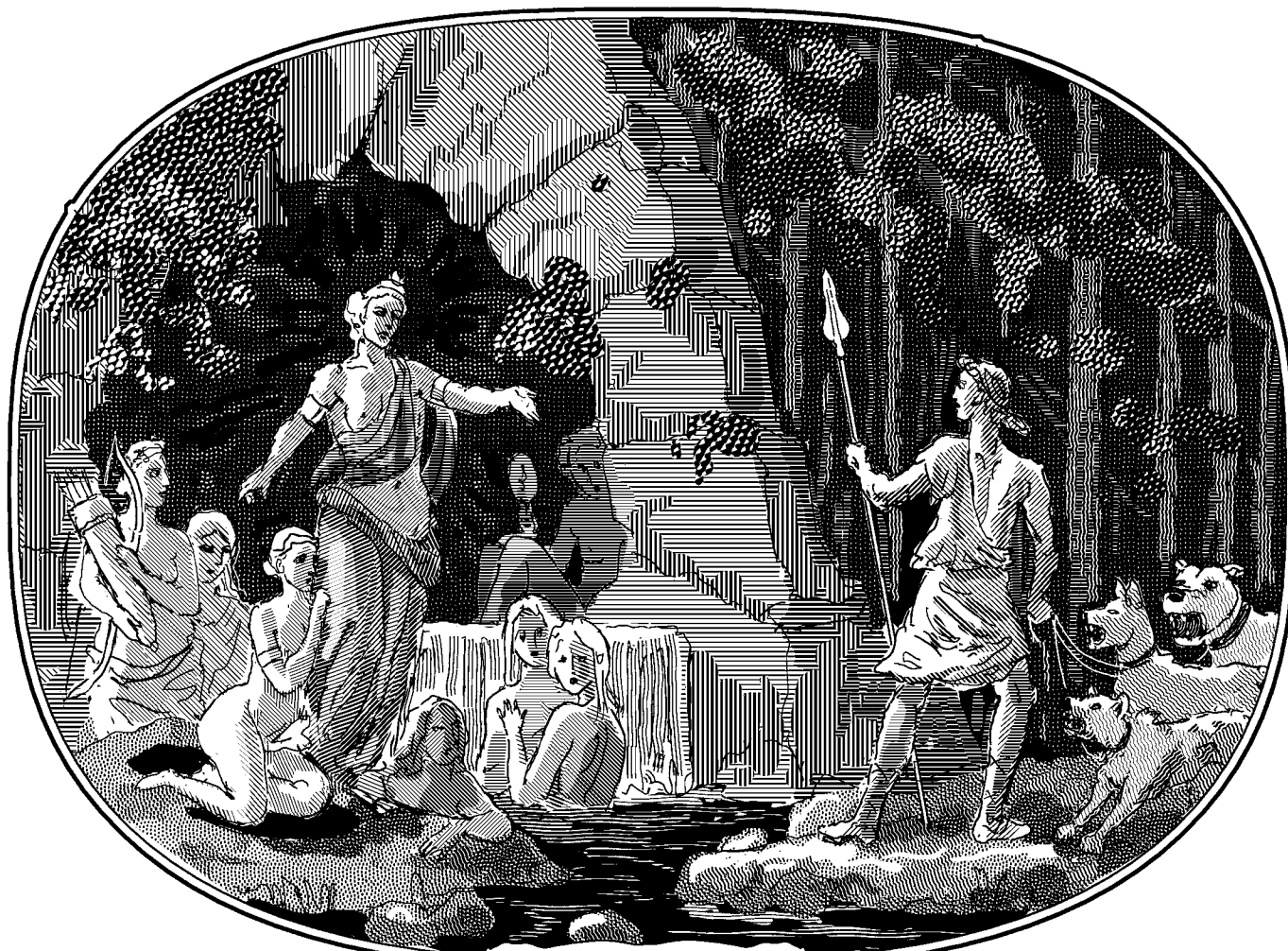
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Book Review by Helen Roy

HUNTING FOR HARMONY

Feminism Against Progress, by Mary Harrington.
Regnery Publishing, 256 pages, \$29.99



ARTEMIS AND ACTAEON

THE DUST JACKET ON THE BRITISH edition of Mary Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* features Artemis, Greek goddess of apparent paradoxes. She is the hunter, but also the hunted; she stands for chastity, but also childbirth. It's a fitting image for a book that advocates "reactionary feminism," which on the surface is a contradiction in terms. Feminism of the popular variety raises the specter of a supposedly regressive past, always threatening to reimpose itself. "Progress" is the legend of how historically marginalized identity groups continue to climb tooth and nail from this outdated morass of gratuitous repression. How could a woman oppose progress, the very thing that propelled her to her current, supposedly elevated status? How could "feminism" be "reactionary"?

A columnist and editor for the online journal *UnHerd*, Harrington recasts "progress" as

a social mythology, ultimately fictitious but made plausible by the industrial revolution. She writes, "What's usually narrated as a story of progress toward feminist freedom and equality can better be understood as a story of economic transitions: in particular, of the transition into industrialized society, and the transformative effect that shift had on every aspect of how men and women live...including how we organise family life."

THE 17TH CENTURY SAW A PROFOUND shift from the premodern "cottage industry" to the sequestered industrialization of factory life. As Harrington tells it, this jarring rearrangement drove the initial wedge between men and women as political animals. Whereas husbands, wives, sons, and daughters once worked together in a mutually productive household, common life began to

"stratify" into two competitive spheres represented by "work" and "home," production and consumption, men and women. The growing alienation between the sexes would gradually intensify into war.

Early advocates of liberalism did not foresee that the economic logic of unbounded individualism in pursuit of profit would be applied to the social and moral arena. On the contrary, from Adam Smith to the American Founders, it was taken for granted that older moral traditions were necessary preconditions of a free market and a free society. Virtuous commercial republics require virtuous people. But nobler ideals gradually lost their footing against the sheer material abundance of the marketplace, argues Harrington. The practical worth and spiritual dignity once embodied in the interdependent home could not compete against the more immediate indica-



**A Declaration of Duties toward Humankind
A Critical Companion to Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots***

Editors:

Eric O. Springsted, American Weil Society, co-founder
Ronald K. L. Collins, First Amendment News, editor

Forthcoming September 2023, ISBN 978-1-5310-2202-0

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tions of productive value represented by the highly efficient (though socially and morally vacuous) factory.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF FACTORY LIFE were more easily endured by men and presented unique dangers to women of childbearing age. Regardless, the women who stayed home still found themselves affected by a new system of values in which their stark biological differences held them back from achieving anything like their former status. Harrington cites Catholic legal scholar Erika Bachiochi: "If your concept of personhood is based on market participation, mothers don't really show up as 'people.'" Convincingly, if rather charitably, Harrington reconceptualizes the history of feminism as the loosely collective action of women fighting to reclaim the standing and purpose lost during the early industrial period. Victorian "protofeminists," as she calls them, argued for the dignity of family against the ravages of unforgiving markets and volatile mores. Feminism as Harrington describes it began in a battle for personhood properly understood, embedded within a network of given family obligations and rightly delimited by the facts of human biology.

In the 20th century, however, feminists were increasingly enabled by the technological evolution of birth control (and later, industrial abortion) to reject the reality of their sexual difference altogether. The loudest and most influential actors would eventually pursue a *disembedded* personhood: their ideal was the deracinated *homo economicus*, whose imagined birthright is to transcend any and all limitations, however natural. Thus, feminism is no longer a matter of achieving *equal* human dignity for men and women in their distinct capacities, but of "liberating" women from their womanhood to pursue "sameness" with men, stripping away every obstacle to power as measured by economic profit. The pursuit of total liberation from social bonds and the body itself in service of markets is the mark of modern feminism. It prompts the still more radical quest to transcend the boundaries of the human species altogether, known as "transhumanism." This is the feminism with which we are now most familiar: that which, empowered by technology, subjugates inherited wisdom and family ties to economic participation.

Harrington seems to suggest that to degrade the body, as well as the bonds our bodies can forge, is to degrade women. Modern women's degradation flies under the cover of empowerment. In reality, it's plain alienation, rebranded. Women have become steadily un-

happier by every available measure under the conditions that were supposed to set them free. This "paradox of declining female happiness" confirms the deep dissatisfaction engendered by living according to pretty lies:

We accepted Technology's promise to make us all pure, free, unencumbered selves. We've pursued that promise, and allowed the wider political, economic and cultural order to name the pursuit "feminism." The further we've slid, collectively, into the pursuit of absolute freedom underwritten by tech, the less we've come to need one another, and the more transactional, hostile, and nihilistic our relationships have become: with each other, with our kids, and with our own bodies.

HARRINGTON'S OWN CIRCUITOUS path from liberal feminist to married mother helps illustrate the error in modern feminism's concept of the female. "Up to the point where I got pregnant, I'd taken for granted the notion that men and women are substantially the same aside from our dangly bits, and 'progress' meant broadly the same thing for both sexes: the equal right to self-realization, shorn of culturally imposed obligations, expectations, stereotypes or constraints." Harrington's baby surprised her, making a fairly dramatic—and indeed, traumatic—entrance into the world. The birth rendered her body completely immobile, held together with staples. Nevertheless, that baby and her needs "mattered more to me than anything else, including my once-treasured autonomy." It is a familiar experience to many mothers who, despite both the demands of the market and the narratives peddled by their liberal feminist forebears, find themselves at least interested, you might even say *in love*, with their newborn babies—to the point of gleefully anticipating and celebrating their bowel movements.

Maternity defies modernity by clearly (sometimes violently) underscoring biological asymmetry, as well as bringing forth the inexplicable and transcendent connection between mother and child, illegible to most outside of that "iconic dyad." The mystic union "continues after birth as well: mothers and their babies co-create one another, in complex neurobiological feedback loops." Socially and scientifically, we cannot escape this fundamental reality. For Harrington, there is no need to escape it: instead, we should embrace it. The "intricate, voiceless dialogue" between mother and child emerges as the heartbeat of the book.



WHILE IT PRESENTS AS A HIGHLY analytical and radical historical revisionism, Harrington's project might more accurately be understood as an ode to the deep love between mother and child, and to the very concept of motherhood. It is clear that she understands maternity, in its biological and theological significance, as "the final battlefield" against a quickening liberal effort to liquidate all distinctions, be they political, personal, or physical. In a chapter titled "The Devouring Mother," Harrington draws a line from the mass outsourcing and bureaucratization of maternal care to a host of social ills that seem to dominate today's political environment. She writes, "It's difficult to prove a causal link, but it is striking that bureaucratically managed physical and emotional 'safety' has become a key political demand for young adults, around two decades after the rapid spread of nursery-based childcare.... [A] generation has grown up that regards the suffocating 'care' of a risk-averse, third-party pseudoparent not as the enemy of their individual flourishing, but as its enabling condition." Can conservatives, in fairness, complain about the social and psychological weaknesses of the daycare generation while simultaneously ignoring the economic and social factors that compel their mothers to work?

Both feminists and anti-feminists will struggle to claim Mary Harrington as their own—the former because she isn't a feminist,

and the latter because she is one. But bickering over the terminology seems like a fruitless distraction. Harrington's great success is that she has reframed the sex wars entirely. She offers men and women an opportunity to unite around a common enemy and in favor of a common ideal. The battle is no longer girls versus boys. It's girls and boys versus what she calls the "Cyborg Theocracy": the unbounded encroachment of technology on human intimacy in all its forms.

Harrington insists that if we are serious about winning the war against Cyborg Theocracy, we must embrace *distinction*. Society must let men (and women) rediscover and *be* who they uniquely *are* within the exclusive company of their own sex. Put simply, we need to bring back single-sex spaces. Only then can men and women recover practical complementarity and embrace the possibility of procreation, however risky. These points are developed in her aptly named chapters "Let Men Be," "Abolish Big Romance," and "Rewilding Sex."

IN AN EPIGRAPH, HARRINGTON CITES THE Colombian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila: "The reactionary is not a nostalgic dreamer of a canceled past, but rather a hunter of sacred shades upon the eternal hills." Reactionary feminism will not mean "returning" to some nostalgic image of bygone days, but embodying ancient truths anew in the modern day. The past is only a trap in the world de-

finied by a fictitious "progress"; Artemis' paradoxes are only paradoxes in a world that has lost sight of its final cause. That Artemis could represent hunter and hunted, chastity and childbirth all at once is not a contradiction in terms. It is a matter of forgotten harmony.

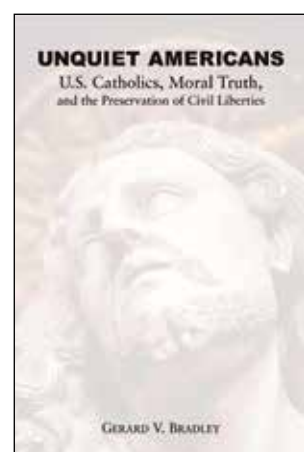
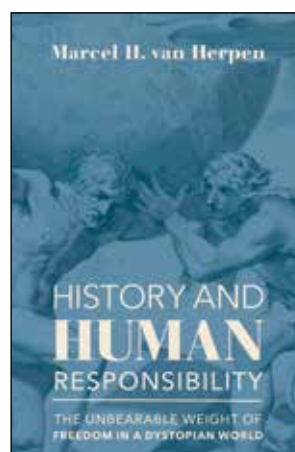
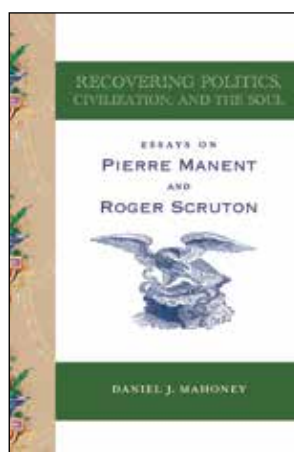
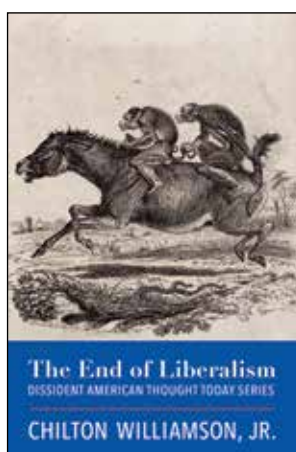
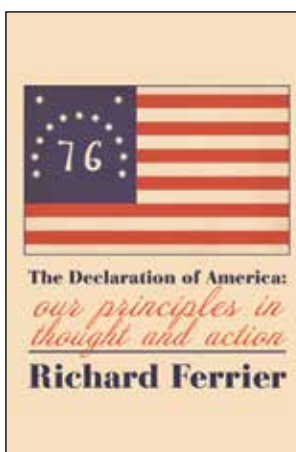
The virtuous hunter is not a senseless killer but a careful custodian, prudentially taking what's proper for the taking and leaving what's not yet ripe. In doing so, he protects the general ecology of the wilderness. In the same way, the chaste virgin is no atom, randomly and arbitrarily floating in an abyss of indifference. Rather, chastity acknowledges the purpose and propriety of sex, an act of unsurpassed intimacy, which holds the keys of life and death. Chastity is the social boundary that protects the sexual environment most conducive to having and raising healthy children. So the mythology of Artemis is less a paradox than a parallax.

Perhaps the same logic can apply to the sex wars. Men and women only *appear* to be enemies, or even competitors, in a world made deaf to the harmony of Creation. Liberal feminism only makes sense in that world. But perhaps by embracing their distinct dignities, men and women can ironically *protect* their unity, taking refuge in the sacred shade that hovers over the eternal hills.

Helen Roy is a contributing editor of *The American Mind* and a fellow of the Claremont Institute.

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